

VZCZCXRO4658
OO RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK
DE RUEHLB #3006/01 2581528
ZNY SSSSS ZZH
O 151528Z SEP 06
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5628
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 0290

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 003006

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/15/2026

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [LE](#) [IS](#)

SUBJECT: IS MICHEL AOUN PLAYING WITH PRISONER EXCHANGES?

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (S) In a 9/15 meeting with the Ambassador, an agitated Ghattas Khoury -- conveying information on behalf of Saad Hariri -- claimed that Michel Aoun's sudden and mysterious trip to Belgium was part of a prisoner exchange scheme that would destroy the Siniora government's credibility in the process. Hinting at a mole inside the Aoun camp, Khoury reported that Aoun has Hizballah's promise to release the Israeli captives if Aoun can secure the release of Samir Kantar and other Lebanese detained by Israel. The intermediary between Aoun and the Israelis is a Belgium-based Lebanese priest named Jean Ibrahim Abboud who once lived in Israel. Huge rallies will greet Kantar's return to Lebanon, with Aoun seen as the hero and the Siniora government as unable to secure Lebanese rights. The Aoun-Hizballah camp is counting on the weakness of Israeli Prime Minister Olmert, who they believe sees a return of the Israeli captives as his political salvation, in overcoming any Israeli reluctance to deal with Aoun (and Hizballah). Aware that Lebanese often share wild conspiracy theories, Khoury shared a flight manifest and other documents in hopes of bolstering Hariri's argument that this prisoner exchange gambit is serious rather than an overwrought Lebanese conspiracy fantasy, and a serious danger to the Siniora cabinet. End summary.

AOUN ON BELGIAN MILITARY FLIGHT

2. (S) Khoury asked the Ambassador what the USG knew about Aoun's sudden disappearance from Lebanon. The Ambassador noted that he had a meeting set with Aoun for earlier that day that was cancelled by Aoun's staff, citing the General's unscheduled absence from Lebanon. Khoury shared a flight manifest, obtained from "our contacts at the airport," that showed Aoun and two advisors (the ubiquitous Gebran Bassil and Elie Cheddidi) on a CE-10 Belgium Air Force flight 695 from Beirut to Brussels (refueling in Athens) on 9/13. Khoury shook his head when the Ambassador asked whether Aoun might be having some kind of official consultations with the Belgians or with the EU.

HIZBALLAH AUTHORIZED AOUN ON TRADING SOLDIERS FOR KANTAR

3. (S) Hinting at the Hariris having a mole in the Aoun camp, Khoury said that Aoun was off to meet with Israeli officials either in Brussels or perhaps even in Israel. Hizballah, Khoury reported, had offered Aoun a deal: Aoun

can turn over the two Israeli soldiers captured by Hizballah on July 12 (the incident that sparked the recent conflict), if he can convince the Israelis to release Samir Kantar (imprisoned in Israel for murder since 1978) and other Lebanese detainees, which Khoury presumed meant those seized by Israel during the recent conflict. With Hizballah's promise in his pocket, Aoun is off to see what he can do. Hizballah and Aoun believe that Olmert is so weak that he wants the Israeli captives released at any price, even at the expense of possibly strengthening Aoun and Hizballah.

HUGE RALLIES TO WELCOME KANTAR,
PROCLAIM AOUN AS A HERO

14. (S) Aoun would either travel with Kantar back to Lebanon or be on hand to receive him when he is released. Enormous Hizballah-orchestrated rallies would welcome Kantar and play up Aoun as the hero of the prisoner exchange. By contrast, Siniora and his cabinet will look weak and ineffective, unable to protect Lebanese interests and incapable of securing Kantar's release. "People will ask," Khoury said, "'where are your American friends? What good are they?'" The exchange will become part of the Aoun-Hizballah effort to topple the government.

15. (S) The intermediary between Aoun and the Israelis, according to Khoury, is a Catholic priest of Lebanese origin named Jean Ibrahim Abboud, formerly the Latin Archbishop of Tripoli. Abboud reportedly lived in Israel from 1976 to 1980 and still maintains close ties there. According to Lebanese immigration information, Abboud last entered Lebanon via Belgium military transport on September 2 and stayed for three days. He also visited Lebanon from July 29 to August

BEIRUT 00003006 002 OF 002

4, transiting Syria. Abboud's brother Colonel Youssef Abboud is, according to Khoury, the LAF officer in charge of Michel Aoun's LAF-provided security detail.

16. (S) Khoury, who accepted Hariri's tale of intrigue fully, expressed deep alarm about this development. He expressed hope that the USG would be able to persuade Israel not to take steps that would lead to a strengthening of Michel Aoun and Hizballah, which he argued would be against Israel's long-term interests in Lebanon.

COMMENT

17. (S) Aoun's mysterious trip to Belgium by military aircraft has provoked enormous speculation in Lebanon (especially in the absence of the Belgium Ambassador), and conspiracy theorists working overtime might have developed the scenario above. We note that Aoun's people have called to reschedule the Ambassador's meeting with Aoun for 9/15, suggesting that Aoun (a) will be back in Lebanon soon and (b) is not yet booked solid with massive public rallies filled with enthusiastic throngs welcoming back Samir Kantar and proclaiming Aoun a hero. So, at most, it seems that Aoun's Belgian excursion, if it was linked to prisoner exchanges as Khoury (speaking for Hariri) insisted, was at best an exploratory mission.

18. (S) Both Israel and Lebanon have, we understand, accepted the UN as the sole mediator on the prisoner issue. Presumably, both will stick to that formula. We wonder whether the UN is amenable to a message that its mediation efforts should reinforce the GOL and not strengthen those trying to destroy the Lebanese cabinet. The Ambassador will explore this issue with UNSYG Annan's Personal Representative for Lebanon Geir Pedersen, and we will also quiz Aoun when we see him on Saturday about his Belgian trip.
FELTMAN